

WHITE LILY OF THE NORTH...

On February 15th, 1951, Sister Pélagie made her religious profession in the Institute of the Grey Nuns of Montreal. You may think, at first sight, that there is nothing extraordinary in this event; however, you will soon change your mind when you learn that this event took place at Chesterfield Inlet, on the west coast of the Hudson's Bay at 225 miles only to the South of the Arctic Circle. Moreover, the new Grey Nun, Naya Pélagie (Naya means Sister), is the first Eskimo girl ever to become a member of a religious community.

To judge this event at its true value it must be remembered that only 40 years ago paganism reigned in this area. The nomadic Eskimo had not yet outlived the stone age. The native tribes were in complete ignorance of religion and civilization; superstition and witchcraft, murders and thefts were very frequent...

February 15, 1951, helps us to understand the Church's success and triumph in bringing civilization and religion to the Northland: Naya Pélagie, the primitive Eskimo girl of yesterday, the inmate of the white igloos, has consecrated her life to God.

His Excellency Bishop Marc Lacroix, O.M.I., Bishop of the Hudson's Bay Vicariate, was there along with many missionaries, the Grey Nuns of Chesterfield Inlet's hospital and a numerous gathering of Catholic Eskimos.

Technicians of the National Film Board were also present, and soon, the pictures they have taken will probably be shown to audiences in Canada and the United States.

Eskimo life.

Naya Pélagie's story is an interesting one. She is a member of the Padlermiut tribe, which dwells

in the neighbouring mission of Eskimo Point. Her father, Okatsiak, an old sorcerer, and her mother, became the first converts and ever since then have always been exemplary Christians.

On March 9, 1931, in an igloo somewhere on the inland, the wife of Joseph Okatsiak gave birth to a little girl who was called Puvlalerak and later baptized under the name of Pélagie.

Like all other Eskimo children, Pélagie spent the first two years of her life on her mother's back. Like all others, she remained in the igloo during the winter and lived under a tent during the summer. She ate frozen cariboo meat and sometimes fish and seal. She participated in the simple games of her companions, and learned from her mother the art of scraping, chewing and sewing the hides used in the fabrication of clothing. In all ways and manners, she shared in the simple and carefree life of these Bohemian citizens of the Arctic. Some ten years ago I had the occasion of spending a few weeks in the Eskimo camp in which Pélagie dwelt. She was then a gay and amiable child; she did not, however, stand out amongst the others.

One day Pélagie came to Chesterfield Inlet where, more than once, she visited the hospital and came to know these Angels of the frozen North, the Grey Nuns. She was profoundly impressed by them, and carried those impressions with her through the years.

In 1915, an epidemic of diphtheria broke out in the Padlermiut tribe and made many victims. An Eskimo chose this occasion to found a new religion, which, he claimed, would appease the wrath of the ancestral spirits of the tribe. He visited many camps, exhorting people to adopt anew the old pagan superstitions and customs. Pélagie's family, whom he knew to be devoutly Christian, was among those whom he tried to win over to his cause. During a lengthy demonstration of witchcraft, he endeavoured to make the spirit of the deceased grandfather

appear; he hoped, through this means, to convince people of his divine mission. But he finally had to admit his defeat: « Your father is too high in heaven, I cannot get him to come down ». And he left, to carry elsewhere his teachings.

Vocation

The unexpected effect of these anti-Christian activities was to increase the fervor of some of the faithful. It was at this time that Pélagie felt an inner voice inviting her to consecrate her life to God in order to serve the other members of her race. She consulted her father: he declared that he would be happy to offer his daughter to the service of God.

Bishop Lacroix approved the request of Pélagie and in 1946, she arrived at Chesterfield Inlet. She spent 2 years with the Sisters. She gave proof of her spirit of self-devotion and her good will through the accomplishment of the tasks which were confided to her. Two years later, Pélagie finally obtained the permission to begin officially her postulate at Chesterfield Inlet.

Then for two years, Pélagie was a novice and trained herself for religious life. It wasn't easy. The young novice one day said to the Sisters: « Why was I born an Eskimo? You white people have many ideas and you can meditate lengthily in the chapel; but I find it very difficult. » However, she was intelligent, and with the help of God, she made rapid progress. She was finally called to take her first vows.

This news rejoiced everybody, for Naya Pélagie had conquered all hearts. Always devoted and ready to serve, she manifested her even temper and gentle dispositions. She smiled almost continually, which seemed to impart a spiritual beauty to her dark, regular and typically Mongolian features. A striking

dignity had replaced the usual mischievousness which you expect to find in a young girl of her age. Without sacrificing her charming simplicity, the young Eskimo had acquired a distinction which won her the respect of all.

At the beginning, occasionally, an old man would say: « It is too bad that Pélagie wants to become a Sister. She is an excellent girl and she would have made an excellent wife for my grandson. » But now, Pélagie Puvlalerak does not exist any more for the Eskimos. She has been replaced by Naya Pélagie, and none would even dare to treat her with familiarity or disrespect.

The Profession.

The four and a half years of preparation are over. The long-awaited day of profession has arrived. Naya Pélagie did not sleep much the preceding night. She awoke often, thinking that the hour for rising had arrived.

Bishop Lacroix entered the chapel in a procession, and all the Eskimos were there to attend the ceremony. It is worthy of notice that the Church's liturgy does so much to emphasize occasions such as these. The Bishop was at the altar, vested in his most beautiful ornaments; his mitre was on his head and he held his crozier in his hand. Sitting down, he questioned the young novice. Questions and answers were carried on in Eskimo language; although Naya Pélagie understands French fairly well, she cannot express herself clearly in this language.

Kneeling at the foot of the altar between Sister Saint Ignace of Loyola and Sister Thérèse, who have spent the last twenty years at Chesterfield Inlet, the young Eskimo Sister gives a clear answer to the questions which are asked her:

—« Atatatsiaralook » (Grandfather)—That is the

name the Eskimos give to the Bishop). « I humbly ask permission to consecrate myself entirely to God, to serve... Jesus Christ in the persons of the poor... ».

—The Bishop answers: « Tookissitsiaralooar-pit... » « Do you understand fully the importance of the step you wish to take? »

—« Amilar, Atatsiaralook. k'anyimatsiarponunga... « Certainly, Grandfather, I know it well. I hope that the Lord who calls me will bless my good will and give strength to my weakness... »

The ceremony went on: imposition of the new head-dress which the Sister shall wear in the future, the bestowing of the small golden cross which shall be her most precious possession...

Finally, on her knees. Naya Pélagie pronounced the words which were to bind her for a year in the service of God. These vows will be renewed freely each year. In five years, if she so desires she shall pronounce her perpetual vows. The words of her profession are written in graphic symbols which all the Eskimos today can read and write. This formula will be kept safely and placed in her coffin when she dies.

The young twenty-year old Eskimo girl, who only yesterday was a primitive raw meat-eater pronounced her vows with simple dignity and ease which profoundly impressed all those who were there:

« Ouwanga, Pélagie, illactitaoyomablounga... « I... of my own free will... do make... the simple vows of poverty, chastity and obedience... for one year... »

I must say that I was deeply moved, and I think that many others, Whites and Eskimos, were also.

The Grey Nuns now count in their ranks the first religious Sister of the Eskimo race!

A well-deserved success.

Father Arsène Turquetal, O.M.I., founder of our missions, who endured great physical and moral

sufferings, the greatest of which was the indifference and the contempt of the Eskimos, wrote the following words to his Bishop in 1915: « ... What saddens me most is the apparent uselessness of our stay here. You sound as if you have almost lost hope. If we do lose hope ourselves, our mission would be doomed to failure... » To a co-missionary he confided: « We do not have a single Christian here (after many years spent at Chesterfield Inlet)... Our experiences are void of consolations and encouragements... and there is danger of losing faith in the future... »

In spite of everything, Father Turquetil persevered.

The sacrifices and efforts of the Sisters and the missionaries (three of whom have lost their life in tragic accidents and their bodies have never been found), all this has not been in vain.

Naya Pélagie, pure lily of the sterile wastes of the North, is the symbol of the Church's magnificent victory in these desolate regions where paganism is not yet dead.

And to think that these events are taking place, not on the far-flung mission fields of China or in the heart of the African jungle, but in the vast northern regions of our own Canada.

JEAN PHILIPPE, O.M.I.